

Darkness of Death Books Presents...

IN THE

DARKNESS OF DEATH

A HORROR COLLECTION

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In The Darkness of Death

By Matthew C. Herch

And Julia A. Kelly

Published by Darkness of Death Books

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First Edition.

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Introduction

For our first collection of stories and poems, Julia and I decided to set the theme to ‘Death.’ But what is death?

In my opinion, death is not the end of all dreams, thoughts, and processes. No, death is only the beginning. It’s sort of like being born. You go from one world into a new one. Of course there will be some discomfort, but eventually you will grow used to it.

Some of our stories deal with the undead; others deal with dying; while still others deal with the thought of killing ourselves.

Many things in this life are uncertain, but there is one thing that will always happen, no matter the circumstances—death.

You can eat all the healthy foods you want; you can paint your face with all the latest makeup; you can freeze your body like a Popsicle for eternity. No matter what, death is the only thing in this crazy life that can be counted on.

The Gallagher City Incident

By Matthew C. Herch Jr.

Part 1: Waiting to Die

There was only myself and five others left alive. At the beginning of the outbreak, we started with twenty fine officers on the force. We had just been dealt a fatal blow when the zombies smashed through our main barricade. We emptied everything we had into the soulless bodies, but to no avail. They overcame 14 of the officers, their bodies torn and mutilated as if in a war-zone. The rest of us retreated farther back into the building,

into the cafeteria. Since then, all those men who had been killed have gotten up and tried to kill us. We've taken care of them permanently.

It took us nine hours to barricade the cafe, gather supplies, and collect ourselves. We barricaded the doors and windows, but left the back exit door un-barred, just in case. We'd been in the building for seven days, and things were beginning to look grim. We were hungry, tired, and I personally wanted to kill every person there in frustration. That's when I decided to speak up.

"So, we have to make a decision here." I said, expecting some responses, but instead getting blank stares. I paused, and then continued. "We can't just sit here and wait to die. I for one refuse to give up."

This time I got more of a response, a few more blank stares. Finally, Bill, one of my best friends, got up from his seat at the table and walked up to me. Bill Stacey was a fifty-year-old veteran cop in my precinct. I'd invited him over

almost every night for poker, and we had grown on each other through that. He was good looking for his age, and very strong. But the guy didn't have much brain, and he had done some very stupid things.

Bill came close to me and pulled me to the side. He wanted to talk in private. We walked to the empty vending machine, away from the others and talked.

"John, what do you expect us to do?" He began. "We're tired."

"Where are your balls, huh? We can't stay here; we'll die of hunger." I replied. "Besides, what do you have to lose?"

"You know, maybe your right. I'd go, but what about these others?"

"Fuck 'em" I said, trying to keep quiet. "We'll give them the choice."

I turned toward the group of blood-covered officers and gave them the choice to stay

in the department, or go with me and Bill. I explained that we would go to the military armory first to pick up some supplies. From there, we would get transportation to Gallagher Lake, where we would stay until the government fixed the problem.

I expected a hail of approval from the entire department. Instead, they all wanted to sit and feel sorry for themselves. So Bill and I started out. We grabbed our pistols and rationed out ammo; one hundred rounds per gun. We walked toward the back door and turned around, taking in our last view of the department we had worked at for so long. We finally exited into the back alley. As soon as we stepped outside, two lone zombies wandering around on the cement greeted us. The zombies were just like the hundreds of others we had seen, rotting and smelly. Bill fired two shots, both demolishing their skulls. The force blew their brains out onto the asphalt, and their bodies fell to the ground.

Bill reloaded his clip with two bullets, and cocked his pistol as we hesitated forward.

“Gotta keep fifteen in at all times.” He said.

We came upon the exit of the alley and looked out into the main drag of the city. The street was infested with zombies, and a huge inferno blocking the street going east. I looked at Bill sarcastically, and chuckled.

“Looks like this is a great route!” I said. The armory was two blocks east of our current position.

Bill looked around the alley for a way to get through the crowd when I noticed a doorway on the opposite end. It was the door into the Hillsburg Apartments. I had forgotten about the calm times when I lived there in peace. The building was huge and took up two city blocks. If we could navigate the first floor all the way through, we could come out just across from the Armory. So we headed down the alley and looked

at the rusted door. It was the kitchen exit. Bill watched my back as I opened it, it's hinges creaking like a banshee's scream. Bill and I flicked on our flashlights and stepped into the building, closing the door behind us.

Part 2: The Hillsburg Apartments

We stepped into the dark kitchen, overwhelmed by the stench. Rotting food had been sitting here for at least seven days and was beginning to make an impact. We walked through the kitchen, hesitant to move too quick. I took a wrong step and slipped on a mold-ridden cloth. I thought it was a zombie, so I pulled my gun and fired off a shot. Bill stood over me and laughed.

“Was that mop attacking you?” he said.

I got up, feeling like an idiot. We neared the exit; I looked above the door and read the sign. "Mansfield's" it read. Mansfield's was a high class restaurant that had just taken residence in the building.

"Hey, maybe we can get a bite to eat!" I said, trying to lighten the mood.

I had Bill hold my gun while I opened the light swinging door. *Great, another dark room* I thought as I stepped through the doorway. The sight in front of us made us stop dead. There was a young boy, no older then five, crouched on the floor.

"Hey kid!" Bill yelled.

"Shut up, idiot!" I screamed, and knocked him in the head with my pistol. "Are you stupid? That thing is not a child."

The boy stood up from his position and turned around. It was a gruesome sight. Half of his face was missing, the skull and eyes to be seen

clearly. Bill and I staggered back as we looked upon the horrible face. The boy began to run toward us, stepping on broken glass as his feet hit the ground. As quick as I could, I raised my pistol and fired off a shot into the boy's skull. A red mist rained down onto us, and we straggled forward.

There was complete silence as we walked through the restaurant. I hit my side on a table that had escaped my field of view, and that did it. Ten to twenty zombies stood up from feasting on the multitude of corpses strewn about.

"What the fuck is this?" I said, surprised at the number of zombies in the room. "We have to get through here."

"No wait!" Bill yelled. He pointed at a small door to the left of us. "That's the first floor of the apartments!"

We ran for the door, firing off some rounds into the rotting corpses. I didn't see how many we hit. Bill swung open the door and we ran inside, slamming it shut. We stood there for a

moment, trying to catch out breath. The zombies were pounding on the wooden door; thankfully, they didn't have enough strength to break it.

We walked forward to reveal the first class apartments. It was just as horrible as the other places we had been. But horrible was beginning to become the norm for us. We were becoming desensitized to the horrors of this new world. Trash, clothing, household items, and bodies were everywhere. We found that there were six bodies in the hall, all either decapitated or so dead that there was no worry of them coming back.

The doors were covered with blood except one, which we stopped at.

"Maybe we can get some supplies in there." Bill suggested.

"Maybe you're right, they must have some dry food or something, I'm starving." I replied.

We walked through the doorway and into apartment 21A, stepping over the lifeless body in the way.

Part 3: The Note

We walked into the living room of the apartment, only to behold another terrible scene. A small dog was lying on the ground, half decayed. Its stomach had been torn open, the contents of which were strewn about the floor. The room reeked of rotting flesh. We stepped over the poor animal and into the kitchen. There was a small dining table in the corner. We were very tired, so we decided to sit down and rest for a few minutes. We sat still and silent until I noticed a piece of paper on the table, soaked with blood. I tried to

make out the words, and from what I could read, it said:

“If you are reading this, you are obviously alive, and let’s hope you stay that way. Unfortunately, I will not be for much longer. They’re coming for me. I know too much. They need me dead. No matter what you do, you must get out of the city. Don’t trust anyone; things are not as they appear. They did all this, and they’re planning something even bigger. You have no idea how deep this goes. For now, just remember to stay away from...”

The rest of the note was torn off, and I couldn’t find the missing piece.

“Where should we stay away from?” I said to Bill. “And what does he mean by ‘they’?”

As soon as I said this, a loud noise boomed in the living room. We raised our guns and fell silent.

“My dad wrote that note.” A man said as he stepped through the living room. “I guess they killed him, but that’s okay, I never liked him anyway.”

Bill began to lower his gun, but I did not waver. I did not trust the man, for something about him was not right. He was tall and muscular, and wore jeans and a shirt. He was carrying a backpack with him, which seemed very heavy. I finally lowered my gun after my arm got tired.

“Thanks man, I thought you were going to shoot me.” He said. “My name’s Brad, I’ve been in this place for God knows how long. I just cleared out this hall and stayed here, living off my dog.”

Shit! I thought. *This guy was eating his dog?* I just stood there staring while he was talking. I wasn’t paying attention to anything he was saying; I was wondering who the hell the guy was. Brad stuck out his hand to shake mine; this brought me back from my thoughts. I took his hand and shook it firmly, though I didn’t know why. Out of kindness on my part, maybe. It was nice to see

another human alive, though. Suddenly, the man began to run out of the apartment.

“Hey” I yelled. “Where are you going?”

The man stopped and looked back at us. “To the Armory. That’s where you’re going, right?”

That statement made us stop as if we had seen a ghost. How did he know we were going to the Armory?

Brad began to run again, out of the apartment and down the hallway, toward the stairs. Bill and I ran after him, eventually catching up.

“Down here is the lobby,” Brad yelled.

He reached into his backpack and pulled out a powerful Desert Eagle handgun.

“Where did you get that?” Bill said in envy.

“The Armory. I’ve been there before. It should be fine because I cleared it as I went through.” He said.

Brad then began to walk down the stairs, and we followed. The lobby of the building was in ruins. A semi truck had broken through the front

wall, and small fires now surrounded it. I looked out into the street, and saw maybe thirty zombies, all huddling around something. This time, Brad reached into his backpack, and pulled out a grenade.

“You guys better get back,” he said as he pulled the pin. Bill and I stepped back onto the stairs as Brad threw the grenade out into the street. It exploded, throwing zombies and parts of zombies everywhere. That’s when I heard a loud scream. Bill and I ran out into the now bloody and empty street in front of the armory.

There, kneeling on the asphalt was Mike. Mike was a fellow officer from the GPD.

“Those things killed Jack.” He said, barely able to talk while he was catching his breath.

“Damn.” I said. Behind us, Brad was walking toward Mike.

“Hey Brad, this is Mike. He’s our...” I stopped in the middle of my sentence. Brad had pulled his gun out and placed it up to Mike’s head.

“You, fuckers are not getting into that Armory.” He said as he pushed Mike’s head with

his gun. “We’re in there, and we don’t need more trouble.”

“What do you mean ‘we’”? I asked, now pissed at the guy.

He turned toward me and gave a smile as evil as Satan himself, and then he pulled the trigger. Brains and blood burst out the back of Mike’s head as his lifeless body fell to the cement.

“Shit, man,” Bill said, now hysterical.

Brad fired his gun toward me, but Bill took the shot, jumping in front of me. Thankfully, he wasn’t hurt badly; he was only hit in his leg. I pulled up my gun and fired three rounds at Brad, but missed. He ran toward the Hospital, which was right next to the apartments. That’s when I noticed that zombies had surrounded us. I ran back to Bill, and checked his leg. It was worse than I thought. I tried to get him to walk, but he simply couldn’t. We were in the middle of the street, with zombies surrounding us, and one of us injured. We were officially fucked.

Part 4: The Armory

Bill was screaming in pain as I dragged him across the concrete toward the Armory. I didn't want to go in there, but we had little choice. The zombies were inching toward us, a few of them breaking into slow runs. That's when Bill looked up at me and showed his inner fears that were usually kept hidden.

“Please don't leave me.” He said with a shaky voice. His breathing was growing slower and slower as we neared the building. Bill gave me one final look; his glazed eyes filled with tears, and tried to speak. I looked toward his injury, and then quickly looked away. It was infected, severely, and to tell you what it looked like would be a dishonor to him. I looked back at his face, as he muttered his final words.

“Thanks, John; for everything.”

At that, Bill took his last breaths and fell limp in my arms. My eyes welled up with tears as I continued to drag his body toward the building.

“Come on Bill.” I said as I struggled to pull his corpse up the steps and to the large iron doors of the armory. Suddenly, Bill's body began to shake violently. *Damn it* I thought, knowing what was happening. Bill was turning, even though he had no contact with a zombie. Even though I loved my friend, I knew what had to be done. I took out my pistol and aimed it at Bill's pulsating head. One round was all it took. His body fell to the cement steps and rolled part-way down them.

“See ya later, Bill” I said, as I slowly opened the heavy door.

I walked into the Armory and let the door slam shut. There was no way those things could get in there.

During my whole ordeal--all the stress--I had not cried once. But staring death in the face everyday, and watching my lifetime friend turn was all I could take. I dropped to the floor and cried. I cried more than I had ever cried in my life. It felt good, as if a part of Bill was still with me. I cried for what must have been hours. When I finally finished, I got up to look out the barred window. It was day light out, and the streets were illuminated with the warmth of the sun's light. Unfortunately, it didn't make the situation any easier to handle. I picked up my gun from the cold marble floor and took in the scene in front of me. Light.....everywhere!! Not sunlight, but artificial light! The city hadn't had power for over a week, so the sight of the light bulb illuminating the darkness instilled a new hope in me. Then, just as quickly as it came, the light went away. A loud noise like that of a speeding train followed, which seemed to be coming from below the building. I had worked in the Armory for a short time while at the police academy. I hadn't known the whole

building, most of it was secretive, but what I had known was that there was a power generator in the lower levels of the building.

I had one reason for being at the armory in the first place, that was to obtain weaponry to assist Bill and me on our way to Gallagher Lake. I was not about to leave the armory without weapons and risk dying. That would make Bill's death vain. I decided to press on and attempt to reactivate the power generator. I was at a loss as to who might have disabled it. The first thought that popped into my head was that Brad, my newfound enemy, was behind it. *Why doesn't that bastard want me in this place?* I thought to myself. *What the hell is going on in here.*

I walked forward through the large lobby, and to the back of the room. There was the auxiliary elevator which led to public access floors, and the main elevator, which led to basement levels and the generator area. I boarded the main elevator and pressed the small plastic button for

the generator room. As I watched the elevator doors close, I felt as if the darkness was engulfing me, never to let go. It was as though something bad was down in the darkness of the basement, but I just didn't know what. The floors flew by, represented by the small blinking lights at the top of the doors. Every time I passed a floor, the damn thing would beep. I finally reached the lowest basement level, B4. The doors slowly opened, allowing a blast of cool air to hit me like a thousand knives. It was freezing in the basement; I wished I had a jacket. Lifting my pistol to eye level, I slowly stepped out of the elevator, and into the cold darkness of that subterranean world.

The basement was a dark dungeon-like place, which I only faintly remembered. A few more steps forward and my eyes beheld an amazing sight. Along the cold wet walls of the basement level were hundreds of cells, prison cells. But that wasn't the scariest part. The cells were occupied by humans, living humans who seemed

to have no sign of zombification. The basement lights began to flicker and then stayed illuminated. There, painted on the floor in the center of the room, was the CDC official seal.

“What the hell was the CDC seal doing in a military building?”

I kept asking this question as I looked at the cells containing the miserable looking people. As I walked through the basement, the people kept staring at me, a few of them tried to speak, but no sounds came out. They all seemed to be starving and dehydrated.

“What's going on here?” I asked out loud. Just as I said this, a loud voice responded from above me.

“Good question John!” It was Brad, dressed in a black suit with a CDC ID tag attached to his side.

Brad stepped onto a small elevator and was lowered to the floor.

“John, you have no business here. I suggest you leave now, while I'm giving you the chance.”

I stood my ground, wanting to know what was happening in the deadly town.

“John, what you see around you is our doing, our great new development.”

Brad began walking around the large room, where the generator should have been.

“You may have heard on the news that scientists, about three months ago, created the first man-made life form. That life form is what caused all this.”

I listened carefully, and watched Brad with my every muscle at the ready, in case he tried something deadly.

“A virus. But not just any virus; it's a selective virus. In other words, it 'turns' only specific people.”

Brad handed me a folder marked “Project: Anna.”

I opened the brown folder, and began reading. The document was my one way ticket to the depths of Hell.

Part 5: The Truth

I read the document thoroughly, though I don't remember it word for word. Brad stood next to me, waiting for me to finish.

“Oh my God.” It was all I could say after reading the top secret document.

Brad turned around and lifted his jacket and shirt. His skin was horrible. Instead of being smooth and healthy, it was covered with small 'bubbles' or boils which seemed to be releasing blood and a green fluid of some sort. Brad began to flex his muscles; that's when things got

sickening. As he flexed, I watched his blood begin to 'boil' underneath his skin. His back began to tear in spots. Brad raised his head and screamed as he lowered his clothing.

“Holy shit, Brad.” I said, almost speechless.

“Yeah John, I'm infected too.”

He turned around and faced me, his eyes met mine with the pure emotion of one who is about to die. He began to speak, but I could tell he was severely weakened.

“You see, we did all this. It was a mistake to think we could test it here in a contained environment.”

He began to look around the room. Though he was injured and infected, I still didn't trust him.

“All these people are our test subjects, but none of them seem to carry the infection, no matter how many injections we give them.” He

reached into his coat and pulled out a small glass vile of a green liquid.

“This is the virus. It's called the 'Anna Strain.' Basically, it attacks the nervous system, shutting it down within minutes. Next it reactivates the system, except for all subsidiary nerves. Finally, it takes control of the motor functions of the host, and tries to spread itself to others. It does this by biting or scratching at other humans.”

Brad began to sweat as he was speaking. I knew he had little time left.

“But, the virus only infects those with a number of t-cells within a certain range. I'm not going into specifics.” Brad threw me the glass vile, which I was able to catch. He fell to the ground on one knee and looked up at me.

“John, you have to get out of here. On the back wall, there's an elevator that will take you to the ground floor and the back loading dock. My truck is in the drive way; take it and get to the lake.”

Brad threw me a set of keys. He was growing weaker and weaker, and I could begin to see the signs of turning.

“Brad, why did you kill Bill?” I felt sorry for Brad, but I needed to know why he took my friend's life.

“John, I did it to save him the pain of turning. He was infected.”

He pulled his jacket open and took out a small gadget.

“This can detect the virus in the veins of the head. Attach it to your gun. Don't let anyone live who is infected, but don't kill anyone who isn't.”

He lowered his head to the floor. Suddenly, he began convulsing. He gave me one last look, and threw up a massive amount of blood which seeped into the cracks and ridges of the floor, forming a complex maze of red. He fell and closed his eyes.

I took everything Brad had given me: the document, the virus, and the keys and attachment. I ran to the other end of the large, cold room, and into the small service elevator. I watched as the numbers flashed, one by one, like the starting lights at a NASCAR race. My muscles were tensed as the elevator reached ground floor. The doors opened to reveal a zombie infested loading dock. I spotted Brad's truck, and made a run for it. I pulled out my pistol and fired off a bevy of shots. Somehow, I made it to the truck and got inside. I sat in the cab, trying to catch my breath for a few seconds. The zombies began piling onto the vehicle, their blood and fluids smearing onto the windows. I put the key into the ignition and started the truck. I floored it. Blood and brain matter covered the truck as I drove through the collective mass of rotting corpses. As I kept going, I could hear the disgusting sounds of cracking bones and gushing blood. The combination of all the brutality made me very sick. I began to feel nauseous and

threw up on the steering wheel, further soiling my bloody uniform.

I cleared the crowd of zombies and began driving freely down the road toward I-65, which led directly to Gallagher Lake. I was about a half-mile from the Armory, when a huge explosion came from the mysterious building. I watched in my rear view mirror as it demolished the hospital and apartment building. I didn't know what caused the explosion, but I didn't care. If it killed those things, then it was fine with me.

As I watched the happy display of the raging inferno, I noticed a large apache helicopter emerge from the burning building. The copter was completely black and unmarked.

"I'm fucked," I said as I began to floor the gas again. The copter began following me, firing rounds into the pavement below the pickup.

"Shit!" I screamed as the copter flew past me.

I was a normal guy, besides having police training. How the hell was I supposed to bring down a military copter? The copter continued to fire rounds at me as I swerved between lanes, burning the tires as I glided. I had been driving about three miles with the helicopter following me. Brooks Forest, which surrounded the lake, was directly in front of me. I had to make it into the forest.

The helicopter fired at me more than before, using larger, explosive rounds. The shrapnel from the small explosions tore apart my left back tire. I almost lost control of the truck, driving on nothing but aluminum rim. I was close to the forest, but the sounds of metal on asphalt made the time seem like hours. I finally made it into the forest, where I was able to lose the persistent copter. I continued to drive on my rim, not wanting to stop anywhere, though I hadn't seen a zombie for miles.

“I told those sons of bitches that the lake was a great place to go,” I said as I smiled happily, knowing that I was finally safe.

As I neared the lake, I was struck with awe. I nearly lost control of the truck again. The lake was surrounded by a huge barbed wire fence and small home-built guard towers with people inside of them.

“Fuck yeah!!” I screamed as I clutched the steering wheel with all my strength. I knew that the people inside of the camp were 'alive'. They walked just like normal people. I slowly approached the gate, my brakes making a horrible screeching as they brought the vehicle to a stop. I honked the horn and waited in the truck until a man dressed in an EMT uniform ran up to my door.

“Shit, sir! Are you okay?” The man eyed me up and down, staring at the blood that covered me.

He pulled out a small device exactly like that which Brad gave me to test for the virus. “Okay, you’re clean,” he said.

I'm covered in blood I thought.

“I am not fucking clean.” I slowly coasted the truck into the large compound. It reminded me of those civil war reenactment fields, with all the tents and guns, and medics, and bodies. I followed the EMT worker, who was walking in front of me, to the edge of the water where I parked the car.

“May we have your keys?” he asked.

“Sure, have fun.” I said, without looking at the guy. I walked slowly toward the edge of the water and sat on a large boulder which overlooked the water.

“I'll be safe here.” I said to myself.

I tried to allow my mind to trust this new place, this new 'heaven', but I had been through too much to trust anything. Would this be another police station to escape from, or was I simply in

denial of the fact that there is nowhere safe left. As I sat, staring at the water, I hoped this was my 'heaven'.

In The Air

By Matthew C. Herch Jr.

Though they had lifted off from Paris only two hours ago, Billy was already feeling the stress of flying. He stared out of the thick glass windows into the endless abyss of clouds and thin air. Billy was the co-pilot of a Boeing 747 passenger jet. He was well built, but had acquired a gut in recent years. He hadn't shaved in days, and he badly needed a shower. The pilot had just left the cabin to take a piss, leaving Billy with no one to talk to and nothing to do. They were twenty-five

thousand feet up, what could one possibly do? Billy just sat twiddling his thumbs until he heard footsteps coming toward the cabin door, then a loud banging on its steel face.

Billy rose from his seat like a giant rising from his meal and stomped toward the door, eager to scold whoever was disturbing him during his pitiful attempt to entertain himself.

“Hey, stop banging on the door, I’m coming!”

The heavy banging continued. *Jesus Christ, stop the banging* he thought. He opened the door wide.

“Hey buddy, what the hell.....” That was all he could say before a rotting fist flew by his face, nearly tearing his nose off.

Billy was stunned as he looked at the ugly figure standing before him. It was a man, standing naked in the doorway of the cabin, about twenty-five years of age. His skin looked as if it might fall

off at any second, and his hair...well there was little to be found. He growled once and jumped forward.

The man landed about five feet from Billy who was almost in tears at the sight. The man's bones were falling out of his putrid body; his eyes glazed over and filled with blood. Worst of all, he began spitting out a rancid black liquid which fell to the floor and splattered into a terrible mess. Billy had no time to think. He ran to a small compartment in the cabin and pulled out a pistol he had always kept with him. He aimed it at the man and pulled the trigger. The bullet pierced the chest cavity, sending blood and flesh through the air, landing on everything and staining it red. Unfortunately, the bullet had no effect. The man was momentarily stunned, but quickly regained himself. He lurched forward with a moan that could only be heard in nightmares, and grabbed onto Billy's bloody uniform.

“No!” Billy screamed as he tried to push the fetid mass of flesh off himself. He knocked the creature to the floor and lowered his pistol to its head. He pulled the trigger again. The shot shattered the zombie’s skull and allowed its blood to flow out of the back of its head. Billy bent down to examine the thing, but instead he looked to his right; into the first-class area of the jet.

Screaming and clawing, growling and cries of terror assailed him. Billy had not seen or heard these things while he was trying to defend his own life. The fifty or so passengers in first class were nothing but a cruel memory. They had all been gashed to shreds by the economy class passengers. Something in the plane had turned them all into flesh-eating monsters. Billy didn’t know what caused the chaos on the plane, but he realized he probably didn’t want to. He quietly got up from the body on the floor and shut the cabin door, locking it.

He grabbed the radio and tried to contact an airport, any airport, but he had no such luck. Nothing but white noise could be heard from the other end. Billy sat in the pilot's seat and grabbed the plane's control mechanism. He lowered the plane beyond the clouds so he could see the city below. It was New York City. The city's lights were out and there was an ominous silence. He finally got low enough to see the ground covered with dead bodies. The only movement was coming from a huge group of what seemed to be zombies.

Billy tried to shove the thought from his head, but he knew it was the only way to escape the terror of the new 'civilization'. He raised the cold pistol to his head and closed his eyes. He pulled the trigger. Nothing. He re-opened his eyes and realized a terrible fact: the pistol only held two rounds. He dropped the gun to the floor and fell to his knees, sobbing. Then an idea struck him. He got up, wiped his sore eyes and sat back in the pilot's seat. He took control of the jet and aimed it

straight for the earth below. He knew this was the only way. The plane grew nearer and nearer to the ground as sounds from the passengers grew even more gruesome. Billy sat in the chair, with his arms crossed against his chest, praying to the Lord to save his soul. Just as the plane was about to hit the ground in the middle of Central Park, he heard a loud beeping sound that seemed to come from all around him.

He jumped up in his warm, cozy bed sweating and shivering with fear.

“It was all a dream!” he cried.

Billy leaned over, turned off his annoying alarm clock, and fell back into bed. Just as he laid his throbbing head on the pillow, he noticed a deformed dark shadow on his wall. He looked toward the doorway and screamed. It was his father, hungry and ready to eat.

The Room

By Matthew C. Herch Jr.

Jonathan could hear the muffled voices of his doctor and grief-stricken mother, but he could not utter a word of comfort to her. No matter how hard he tried, his mouth would not open. He couldn't even hum. Over the past few hours, he'd lost control of just about every part of his body. His eyelids became too heavy to open and it became harder and harder to breathe.

“Mom...Mom, I love you so much.” He could hear the words form in his head, but no one would ever hear them come from his young mouth.

He knew he was dying, in fact, he knew he would be gone soon. How he knew this, he couldn't fathom. Was it some kind of divine message from God, or simply a hard-wired precursor to death? Jonathan wasn't nervous or scared about dying. The pain could never match that of what he had experienced in the last year of his life. What did scare him was what came after death. Would he simply cease to exist, as so many of his close friends had said, or would his spirit be mystically transported to some paradise in the sky? He would know soon enough.

His mother's voice grew more concerned until she began screaming. Something was flowing up from his stomach. When it reached his mouth, he tasted blood. He knew it was time. Suddenly, the backs of his eyelids lit up with a blinding bright

light. It was the first light he had seen in almost five hours. The light seemed to have a voice. It called out to him, its thundering volume overpowering the screams of his mother and the hurried voices of a group of doctors.

“Jonathan, I believe it is your time.”

“I am ready, Lord.” He answered.

“I am not the Lord. Hmmm...You’ll understand soon.”

With that, he was sucked into the white light, while behind him the voices of the doctors spoke.

“He’s gone. I’m sorry.”

Jonathan was sucked through the bright light until it turned into a tunnel similar to the sewers he had seen during his life. This tunnel, unlike the sewers, was clean. Not a spot of dirt anywhere. He slid through the concrete tunnel all the way down until he dropped out and freefell to the floor of a room. Though he knew he hit the

ground hard, he did not feel any pain. It was like he was being constantly drugged.

The four walls seemed to be made of solid concrete, though it looked very polished. He confirmed his theory when he stood up by running his hands over the smooth surface. He looked down at the floor and noticed that it was made of glass. *It must be pretty thick, he thought, in order to hold my weight and the fall I just had.* Beyond the glass were hundreds of thousands of other rooms just like his. Some contained people who sat watching a giant screen which had what seemed to be a movie projected onto it. Other rooms did not contain people. One thing was true of all the rooms. Their floors and ceilings were made of glass, and they all had the giant screen.

Where is the screen in this room, he thought? He looked up at the glass ceiling of his room and noticed that he could see into the room directly above him. The man inside looked strangely familiar. Then, as if a newspaper was thrown to his

doorstep, the information came to him. It was his father. Oh how happy he was to see the man who had died almost ten years before. Jonathan tried to use his voice, but nothing came out. In fact, he finally realized that he didn't have a body. He reminded himself of the ghosts he'd seen in Hollywood movies. His features were all there and he was wearing his favorite shirt and dirty pair of jeans, but he was nearly transparent.

“You won't be able to talk with you mouth.”

Jonathan watched as his father broke his stare from the giant screen and looked down into his room. His father waved, and then pointed to his head.

“We have no need for voice boxes. The creator has given us the power of telepathy. Some people on earth have it, but it's an extremely rare gift.”

“Father,” Jonathan asked with his mind, not even knowing he could. “I know I am dead,

but what is this place? Is this heaven, ‘cause it sure isn’t what I expected?”

“Yeah Jonathan,” His father said with a wide smile. “This is heaven. But you’re not on some far away planet or anything like that. You’re only in another dimension of Earth’s reality. But let me tell you this, your stay here is short.”

“Am I going to Hell?” He asked. He was beginning to worry. “Is that why I don’t have a screen like everyone else?”

“Jonathan, look at all the empty rooms below you. Do you see screens in those rooms?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Jonathan, the screens are only for those that have truly passed on. Look at me. I’m not transparent because I am truly deceased. You however...you’re split between this reality, what Earth calls ‘heaven’, and Earth’s reality. You are not truly dead.”

Jonathan was amazed. He had so many questions, so many which needed answers. Then it hit him again. His father had just said he wasn't dead.

“Wait. I'm not dead?” He asked.

“No you're not. I cannot say anymore about that particular topic. I have a limit, actually, as to what I can answer. The creator is allowing me to answer three of your most pressing questions, either about this life or your Earth life. Please pick your questions wisely, as I know you can.”

Jonathan thought a moment, and then blurted his question out.

“What are those screens for?”

His father chuckled, and then answered his question.

“You're gonna like those when you finally do come here permanently. They are our own personal movie theaters. But not specifically for

Hollywood movies...no, they are made for dreams.”

“Dreams?”

“Yeah, cool eh? You see, whatever you dream with your mind is projected onto the screen telepathically. It could be any dream you wish, even the horrific ones, but you get to choose. Oh, but they do have a great library of movies here. Every one ever made, and the list continues to grow as Spielberg spits ‘em out.”

Jonathan couldn’t help but laugh. What an amazing place this was.

“Oh yeah, you can also read here. But you don’t stay in your room for that. You can travel via tele-transport to the Universe Library where they have every book ever published or unpublished. Again, the list continues to grow.”

“Can I ask my next question?” Jonathan asked, not wanting to interrupt his father.

“Sure Johnny.”

Oh how he missed being called Johnny.

“Okay. Why are the rooms stacked on top of one another in columns?”

“Oh that’s an easy one.” His father said. “Each room is for one specific person. Each column corresponds to a specific family. Simple, yes?”

“Okay, can I add to that question, or will this have to be a separate question?” Jonathan had so much he wanted to know, yet he had very little time.

“As long as it relates to this question, it should be fine.”

“M’kay. Is this place pre-built? I mean, does God know what people will be in what family? Uggh...I’m confusing myself. Well, you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Each room is pre-built, yes, but they arrange themselves according to your actions in life. If you get

married, then the wife's family column becomes combined with the husband's family column. You get the idea."

He did get the idea. All of this was so much to take in. It was almost too much. He wanted to ask his last question, but he wanted it to be a good one, something he *really* wanted to know.

"Alright, third and final question. Who is the creator? Is it God as the Bible describes, or Allah, or Buddha? Who is God?" Jonathan absolutely needed to know the answer to this question. He just hoped his father knew the answer.

"Jonathan. I love you so much. The truth is, God is all of those people. There has always been and always will be one true God. What people call him is up to their culture and religion. But in the end, everyone is following the same God."

That was it, his last question. Just as he was about to tell his father how much he loved him, the voices of the doctors and his emotional mother filled his head. He began to feel a force sucking him into thin air. He saw his father one last time, and watched as he sat down and stared at the giant screen again as it began moving with dreams. He saw himself on the screen swinging at the playground of his childhood, and then he woke up.

He was in extreme pain and he let the doctors know it. It took all six of them to hold him down to the bed as another doctor injected him with some drug. His eyes began feeling heavy again, but this time, he knew he would wake up in the same bed. He allowed himself to drift into the sleep of the drugged.

Two weeks later and he had made a full recovery. The leukemia miraculously disappeared. Even the most hardened doctors had to call it a sure miracle. As he laid in his bed, his mother

sitting in a small chair next to him, he began to think about heaven...about his father.

“Mom, have I got a story to tell you.” He said with a grin on his face.

The School Project

By Matthew C. Herch Jr.

“Alright class, settle down!” The old teacher screamed from behind her aluminum and faux wood desk.

“I’m not dealing with you kids today. Your punishment for being so nasty is this: I want you to copy fifty pages out of the Webster dictionary. I want it by tomorrow, after recess.”

Gasps filled the air as the children of Mrs. Hollow's fifth grade class realized their fate. They would be forced to copy the dictionary, which would take most of their T.V time to accomplish. The children hated that, and some spoke out against it.

"Mrs. Hollow," screamed one male child from the back of the class. "you can't make us do anything. You're just an old hag, what can you do?"

Mrs. Hollow was appalled by the boy's horrible attitude. However, because she always believed in turning the other cheek, she simply kept silent as the entire class began mocking her. *They'll get their day*, she thought.

The school bell rang, signaling the end of the day just as the children had quieted down. They all slipped on their colorful jackets, grabbed their character lunch pales and book bags, and headed out the door. Mrs. Hollow had grown accustomed to not escorting the children out of

the school. She was afraid of the children's parents, and rightly so. If the children were bad, how bad would the parents be?

#

Chris arrived home with his parents at around 3:45 PM, which was a bit later than usual. They had stopped to buy dinner at the local taco joint and he found that to be the perfect opportunity to ask his parents for supplies for his next school project.

“We’re making homemade rope.” He had said in a sweet voice. “I need about twenty feet of twine.”

His parents seemed uninterested as they conducted their constant business calls. They simply nodded. As the family turned into the

driveway of their single-family suburban home, Chris thought about the plan he and his fellow classmates had devised concerning their teacher.

“Hey Chris,” His father yelled from the driver’s seat. “the twine’s in the garage in that bin where we keep the Christmas decorations.”

Chris jumped out of the black SUV and ran to the garage. It had always been a chore for him to open the garage door, but today he was so full of energy that it seemed like he was lifting a feather. The garage was in disarray, as it usually was, but he was able to find his way through the jungle of wires, boxes, and old magazines. There, along the back wall, was the box labeled “Christmas décor.” He lifted the top and set it aside as he dug through the meaningless items. A few glass ornaments, some tinsel, and some crappy garland were all that were left. His family never celebrated an actual Christmas anymore. They barely remembered presents, usually giving him some cash from their pockets to tide him over

until his birthday, which they also forgot more than once. They were just too busy with their own lives to worry about him, and it killed him inside.

He finally found the twine among the garbage in the box and stuffed it into his pants pocket, while placing the lid back on the box. Hopefully the plan would work otherwise there would be hell to pay.

The next day, in Mrs. Hollow's class, recess was about to start.

"Alright kids, your dictionary assignment is due after recess; if you don't have it, I suggest you do it now!"

Just as Mrs. Hollow finished her sentence, the recess bell rang. The class full of snotty rich kids ran out into the warm spring day to put their plan into action. Huddled around a large tree toward the back of the playground, Chris and his classmates presented their supplies. Everyone had brought twenty feet of twine and Chris had brought his backpack out with him.

“Alright,” Chris started. “let’s get this rope made before recess ends.”

Just as the bell rang for the end of recess, the kids finished creating the twenty-foot-long rope. Chris stuffed the creation into his backpack and calmly walked back to Mrs. Hollow’s class. He had always hated Mrs. Hollow. Not only was she poorer than anyone he had ever met, but she was stern and demanding as well. None of the children liked her at all, and they let her know it. But today was the last straw. What’s one less teacher anyway?

The children were settling into their desks when a tiny girl from the group shyly raised her hand.

“Yes Ms. Demetria?”

“May I get a tissue?” Asked the girl, in the sweetest voice she could muster.

“Of course you may, and thank you for being so polite.” Mrs. Hollow pointed at the rest

of the class. “If only the rest of you could be as nice as Ms. Demetria here.”

Ms. Demitria, whom the rest of the class knew as Susan, walked to the corner of the room where the tissue sat, along with a large stone paperweight. While Mrs. Hollow’s back was turned, Susan grabbed the heavy paperweight with two hands and walked behind Mrs. Hollow’s desk, toward the garbage can. Just as she passed the desk, Susan lifted the stone above her head and brought it down on the teacher’s head. Blood splattered onto her uniform as Mrs. Hollow fell forward onto her desk, covering it with her blood.

Chris quickly reached in his backpack and grabbed the rope the class had just made. He tied it into a noose, as he had read in a book once and threw the other end around a light fixture hanging from the ceiling. He tossed the untied end to another classmate as he lifted the teacher’s head by her hair and slipped the noose around her neck. Mrs. Hollow’s eyes were moving, and they began

welling up with tears. *Could she still be alive*, he thought? His mind told him that the next part would solve that.

He formed a line of classmates to pull on the rope from strongest to weakest, himself being in the back.

“Pull!” He yelled.

The kids began pulling the rope as hard as they could, lifting Mrs. Hollow into the air by her neck. Chris could hear her struggling to breathe, which soon turned into liquid coughs, and then nothing. She was dead, he was sure of that. They let go of the rope and watched as the limp body fell to the floor, making a loud thud.

Frantic footsteps could be heard in the hall outside as the children struggled to make themselves cry and appear panicked. The door swung open and the principle stood in the doorway, shocked by the horrible scene.

“Oh my God!” He yelled, covering his face with his shaking hands. “She committed suicide.”

Chris smiled within himself, proud of the elaborate plan they had produced. He felt a bit guilty as he was herded out of the classroom, the police filing in and covering the doorway with caution tape. In less than an hour they realized that Mrs. Hallow had not hung herself; they saw how her head had been bashed in by the paperweight. The police put the school into lockdown and began shouting commands left and right. Chris could see his parents along with all the others gather outside the building. They stood alongside the squad cars and detective units.

In no time at all, Chris and the other children, as well as most of the teachers who came running to the scene had found themselves locked in the gymnasium of the huge school. As he waited to be interrogated he felt no remorse for his actions; he even decided to tell the truth to the detectives. He didn't care in the least bit what

happened to him. He would be away from his uncaring parents, and besides, what's one less teacher anyway? Just as he was about to enter into a makeshift questioning area where a stern-looking investigator stood, he heard the explosive sound of the gymnasium door slamming into the wall. A man of about fifty years of age walked into the gym like a hit man determined to fulfill his client's wishes. Chris watched as the man pulled a black object out of his red windbreaker and raised it into the air.

A bright flash accompanied by the distinct sound of a gunshot filled the gymnasium. All around him, people fell to their bellies and covered their heads with their arms. The adult's screaming and the cries of the many children filled Chris's ears. He joined the others on the floor. In the very back of his mind, Chris knew who the man with the gun was after.

He looked up and over the mass of bodies frozen in fear. The man looked around the room and lowered the gun to his side.

“Someone here killed my wife. Unless one of you confesses, you’re all gonna die one by one!”

The man with his clean shaven face and conventional corporate garb aimed the gun at the head of one of Chris’s classmates. He could see it was a female. The man grabbed the girl by the hair and pulled her to her feet. He wrestled his arm around her neck and placed the barrel of his 9 mm pistol against the side of her head. Chris could finally see who it was. Susan, the girl who had hit Mrs. Hallow on the head with the paperweight was being held in the arms of his teacher’s husband.

“One of you had better confess now or this girl is going to die.”

Chris knew that the girl was only following the orders that he himself had given to her. He couldn’t let her get killed. The killing was his idea in the first place. *Besides*, he thought, *the police will*

take him down before he gets a chance to kill me. If there was one thing his father had taught him at an early age, it was that you must take responsibility for all of your actions.

Knowing this, Chris slowly stood up from the floor and placed his hands on the top of his head as if he were being ordered to do so by the police. The man immediately pulled the gun away from Susan's head and watched as she fell to the floor whimpering like a scared puppy.

"You! You killed my wife." The man said as he pointed the gun at Chris.

Chris just stood silently, accepting the truth and finally understanding the magnitude of what he had done. Tears began to well up in his eyes as his emotions began falling apart.

"Don't cry, kid. If you can take a life, you can deal with having a gun pointed at you and having your life taken away."

Chris's nerves readied for the pain and torment of a gunshot as he saw the man's finger tighten against the trigger. A bright flash followed by an intense burning brought Chris to his knees. The burning started centered on his abdomen then quickly traveled throughout his body. He looked down at his stomach as he lay against the floor and saw his blood flowing freely out of his stomach. He covered the gaping hole with his small hands which quickly grew weaker and weaker. He felt his body begin shaking and a foul tasting liquid enter his mouth, but his concentration remained centered on the man with the gun. It was the last thing he would ever see.

The room grew dark and his body became cold as his father's personality. Chris's eyesight was gone and soon his sense of feeling left too. His sense of hearing remained for the last few seconds as his breathing slowed. He heard many more gunshots and the sounds of the brass casings hitting the gym floor. He heard the panicked

screams of adults and children and the rushed shouting of a group of police officers. The final sound he heard was the sound of a body hitting the floor right next to him. Oh how he wished he could feel the warmth of the body, whoever it was.

His hearing left him and he was finally alone in the darkness of his death. Nothing more could be done for his body or his eternal soul. Suddenly, the darkness lit up with the wicked flares of a million fires. A fearsome laughing filled the darkness as he walked toward the open door decorated with skulls.

Painted Black

By Matthew C. Herch Jr.

It was Kenny's first night in the new house, the house which he and his parents had always dreamed of. He opened the door and flipped the switch on the wall to turn on the bright ceiling light. His room was furnished with all his old furniture including his bed and computer. Being sixteen years old and the son of an Air Force general, he had gotten used to moving around. His father promised him that someday they would

settle down in one place. Somehow, he knew that this new house would be the one.

Kenny sat down at his desk and started his computer. The screen flashed by with gibberish tests and startup logo and then went straight to the desktop. As he clicked the icon to start up his word processor, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up straight. His back felt as if a thousand stares were piercing it. He quickly turned his chair around only to find that there was nothing there, yet he continued to feel the stares.

When his word processor had finally started he opened the file which contained the beginning of his latest short story. For about six years Kenny had been writing short stories based on his experiences in the many lands he had visited. He had quite a following on several internet forums and was planning on creating his own website soon. His fingers began gracefully moving about the keyboard as the words appeared on the screen. Without warning the screen

flickered with a bright red light. Kenny immediately turned off the monitor and turned his chair around. This time he *knew* that someone was watching him.

Though he knew curiosity would eventually be the downfall of mankind, the knowledge didn't keep him from walking toward his closet. He heard a panicked scratching coming from the other side of the flimsy wooden door. Slowly, as if to keep whatever was inside at bay, he opened the closet door. What sat inside was so appalling it nearly made him lose his lunch. On the floor in a pool of vomit sat a boney woman in a long, ragged wedding gown. As if every move she made was painful, the woman turned her head toward Kenny to reveal a horribly disfigured face. He couldn't help but turn away and vomit on the floor. The skin of her face looked as if it had been torn or burned off and there were no teeth left in her rancid mouth.

“What’s wrong, boy!?” The woman screamed angrily. “Why won’t you look at me?”

“No...No way. You’re not real, just a fucking figment of my imagination.” Kenny tried to convince himself that the woman was not actually sitting in front of him, but he failed.

“You’re going to feel what it’s like to be ridiculed and laughed at!” She screamed.

With that, the woman slowly stood up from the floor and Kenny could hear her bones cracking and rubbing together. He stood frozen in fear. The frail old lady suddenly charged forward with great speed hitting Kenny, throwing him through the room and onto his back on the bed. He couldn’t move a muscle, no matter how hard he tried. For the first time, he got a good look at the woman standing up. Her dress was covered with dirt and dried blood and she smelled of rotting flesh. She walked closer to him and pulled a rusty knife from beneath her discolored dress. As she brought the knife close to Kenny’s face, he

noticed that the walls were beginning to melt like wax. The first layer of paint oozed off the wall to reveal a hidden layer. The walls were now jet black and something was written on them in what looked like crusted blood. It was a list of names, maybe twenty or thirty of them.

“Mom!! Help me! Mom!!” Kenny screamed for his mother as the woman lowered the sharp yet rusty knife to his face.

She sliced his flesh from his chin all the way to his forehead in a small arc. Kenny began to cry out in pain as blood quickly oozed from the cut. The woman dug her fingers into the wound and ripped half of the skin on his face off. Blood splattered all over the floor and bed as Kenny watched in shock as the woman disappeared in to nothingness. His father charged into the room with his mother trailing. They stopped where they stood and stared in disbelief at Kenny’s mutilated face, and then glanced down at his hand which held the rusty knife.

Kenny stared at the list of names on the wall and watched as his name was added to it with his own blood. He could take no more pain and could loose no more blood. As his mind grew weary and the room grew dark he could think of nothing else but his willingness to die rather than live with the ridicule he would endure.

He woke up in a white room with a large mirror on the front wall. He knew exactly what he wanted to do. Without saying a word, he walked to the mirror and rammed his head into it, cracking the glass. He rammed his head again and again until finally, he was lying on the ground in a pool of his blood. The room grew dark again, but this time he knew he would not wake up.

Burnt Cookies

By Matthew C. Herch Jr.

Lindsay Hatfield started her career in the pastry arts as an apprentice to the most famous baker in the town of Korgory. Michael Rikke was his name, and almost every woman in the town knew him, but not in the friend sense. Not only was he the best baker, but he was also the best lover. The man was known for picking up women, fucking them, and then dropping them like a basket of fries into hot oil. The strange thing about

all those women is that they never showed their face in the town again. Now, one would think they would at least tell the damned man off, but no. The thing was, back then people kept to themselves and no one intruded in another's business. Hell, even the police minded their own business. There were never any crimes, so suspicion from the police was unnecessary. However, Mr. Rikke would change all that.

Lindsay pushed the glass door of the town bakery open. The smell of fresh baked cakes, pies, and donuts filled her nose and made her empty stomach grumble. It was to be her first day working at the famous bakery. She looked forward to applying the knowledge she received during her courses in the pastry arts over at the college, but she did not look forward to working with the most promiscuous man in town.

She hesitated at the doorway, her eyes wide as if she had just seen a man naked for the first time. Michael Rikke stood at the counter tearing

sheets of wax paper off of a huge roll and laying them onto stainless steel cookie sheets. In her eyes, he was like an angel and a devil, all combined into a sexy package. Lindsay finally mustered up the courage and walked with light steps toward the counter, then stood in front of the man whom she dreaded, yet adored.

“Can I help you?” He asked as he looked up from his work.

“Yes, ummm... I’m...”

“Wait, wait. You must be Lindsay, my new apprentice? Go on in back and get an apron and a hair net. I want to get you working ASAP.”

Without saying a word, Lindsay walked into the swing door and toward the back room where the aprons, hair nets, and other such protective clothing were stored. No matter how hard she tried, she simply could not stop herself from shaking. The man was irresistible. Blue eyes...check. Blonde hair...check. Perfect teeth...

check. The only problem was the fact that he liked to ‘use and then loose’ women.

“Almost ready” Michael yelled from the front counter? “I’m gonna need you up here soon for your first assignment.”

“I’ll be right there.” Lindsay said.

Something in the room across from her caught her eye. It was a pile of dust, or at least it seemed like dust. She put the apron on herself and quickly tied the strings at her lower back and then slipped on her hair net.

Lindsay had always wanted to know how Michael Rikke worked, and now that she was behind the scenes her curiosity got the best of her. She silently walked to the slightly open door and began to pull it wide open when she noticed Michael racing toward her.

“No! No! Leave the gelatin alone, please. I don’t want you to go into that room until I send you in there myself, alright woman?”

“Woman!? No need to get all sexist with me.” Lindsay answered sarcastically. She was no longer afraid of the man, nor entranced by him. *What an asshole* she thought.

“Hey, now you listen to me. You are a woman and you *will* abide by my commands. God may be the almighty out there,” he said as he pointed toward the front door. “But I am the almighty in here.”

“Hey asshole, number one, I don’t have to be here at all. I chose to be your apprentice. Second, I could very easily file a complaint to the health inspector about this place. You have gelatin lying out on the floor and who knows what else. Don’t you dare talk about being almighty because I have all the real power.”

Silently, Michael walked back toward the front counter. He began to run when he saw the whole place fill with smoke from the oven. Lindsay couldn’t help but laugh out loud. The man was a bonafide asshole; she didn’t know what all the

other women ever saw in him. She felt proud of herself for telling Michael off and for having the courage to do it in the first place. She just couldn't stand a man who thought that just because she was a woman she would have to obey every word that fell out of his pompous mouth.

Lindsay walked toward the front counter and watched as Michael shoved some oven mitts on his hands in a panic and swung open the oven door, releasing a dense cloud of smoke that quickly rose toward the ceiling. He pulled out a tray full of pitch-black cookies and threw them onto the glass counter. If she hadn't needed the experience so much, she would have ran out of the front door gasping for air. The smell filling the entire building was absolutely horrible. It reminded Lindsay of burning flesh.

Michael slowly turned toward the counter on which laid the smoking cookies. His eyes were filled with rage and his face was nearly as red as a clown's nose.

“See what you did?” he said as he walked up to the cookies and swept them onto the floor with his arm.

“What I did? I’m not the cause of your tiny attention span. Besides, they’re your cookies.”

“Actually Bitch, they are not my cookies. They were a special order for one of my most loyal customers. And yes, you did cause this. If it hadn’t been for your subordinate behavior, these cookies would have come out fine.”

The bell above the front door rang out again as a customer walked into the famous bakery. The man took two steps into the store and covered his mouth with his shirt.

“What the hell happened in here? Michael, did you burn someone at the stake?” the man asked jokingly.

“Heh...yeah. Listen, I’m not gonna be able to get those cookies to you today. Come back tomorrow and I’ll have them ready. I’m training

my new apprentice here, but she's being quite difficult."

"No problem, Mike. I know how it can be training someone. Just don't treat her too bad, she might just quit on you."

I might just do that, Lindsay thought as the man walked back out the front door. She watched as he took a deep breath of fresh air just outside the shop, and then briskly walked down the street and out of her sight. She was appalled by how Michael could put on the nice guy act with his customers and then show his true self to his new apprentice.

"Get your ass down there and pick up the cookies." Michael said as he pointed to the mess and smiled.

"That's it!" Lindsay screamed. "Pick up your own mess, I'm out of here."

"You're not going anywhere." Michael said as he grabbed Lindsay's arm when she tried to turn

away. “I’m going to send you into the gelatin room now.”

Lindsay watched in horror as Michael slid open a drawer near his hip and picked up a sharp knife. Her eyes met his for a brief second and she could see the truth about all those women deep within him. He had killed them; she had no doubt about that. Just as she was about to pull away, she felt the cool steel blade puncture her skin and dig deep into her stomach. Her mind’s slate was wiped clean of all thoughts as she cried out in pain. Pure instinct drove her hand as it flew through the air and hit Michael in the face, pushing his nose sideways and making blood fly from his deceiving mouth.

He stumbled backward and shoved the drawer closed with his hip, and then fell to the floor with a thud. *Is he out*, she thought as she held her bleeding stomach? The movement of his arms to pick himself up from the floor told her otherwise. Screaming in panic, she tried to run for

the front door but Michael was quicker. She cried out in pain again; tears rolling down her beautiful face as her Achilles tendon was cut by the steel knife. She fell to the floor and hit the ground hard, knocking the wind from her lungs. She lay there gasping to breath as Michael stood over her reaching down to grab her arms and pull her into the back of the shop. The last thing she saw before falling into unconsciousness was the pool of blood that had come from her stomach and ankle, and the devilish smile that adorned Michael's face. It wasn't so beautiful anymore.

The World Outside

By Matthew C. Herch Jr.

I am a child of the Earth, fed by its limitless fruits. I am a man among the worms, comforted by their presence. I am a disciple of nature, awed by its stunning beauty and well kept secrets. It wasn't always this way, though. I used to be a so-called free boy, living in poverty in one of the best kept secrets of the south. My father was a prominent preacher and my mother was a humble housewife, destined to spend her days scrubbing

floors and shucking corn. You see, my father was well attuned to the life-styles of the outside world. He escaped from such a lifestyle. Technology, medicine, even modern religion; they were all evil in his eyes.

My mother, too, had roots in the outside world. She never told me about her life outside of Palestine, but I knew that she wasn't happy with them. I'd heard her many times crying into her pillow, trying not to wake any of the children from their slumber. She'd cursed herself for losing her innocence to an oil tycoon in some strange place she'd called New York.

Of course, I knew of no such places until I had grown to the ripe old age of seventeen. My father took me outside of the town of Palestine and into the big city; it was the only time I would be allowed out of the confines of my hometown. According to him, he'd wanted to show me the evils of modern society. It was in that civilization

built upon evil that I contracted my disease; a disease of sin.

I remember it well as I lay here in the box that I now call home. I remember walking down the paved sidewalk; the smoke from the passing automobiles made me gag for precious air. I saw people talking to boxes that they held up to their ears. What strange practices they had. I held my father tight as we continued down the street and passed a store with flashing lights and signs with words that glowed steadily. My father stopped and told me to look into the window where I would see what major evil this society was built upon. Women of many colors, shapes, and sizes danced around poles wearing absolutely nothing. It was horrible at first. My mind was in confusion. My own father had come from a place like this?

I remember, though, that it was quite entrancing to see those women, dancing for currency, willing to give their bodies in order to make a few dollars. I had never seen a woman

naked, and I didn't think I would until I was married. They were beautiful, the bodies of those women. My father walked away quickly and I had to walk with him, otherwise he'd know that I was staring. I took a few brisk steps and then noticed a small booklet lying on the stone pathway. Its cover was crammed with provocative images of the sins that I now wanted to commit. I'd seen many of the same booklets lining the shelves of the store with the dancing women. I wanted to experience more of that sin, so I picked up the booklet and shoved it into my slacks, silently hoping that my father would not notice the sharp edged bulge.

We walked all the way back to Palestine, my sore feet barely able to take another step. I was eager to get into my room and lock my door so that I could look at my naked beauties.

As soon as I got to the front steps of our old farmhouse, I sprinted through the front door and into my room, locking it behind me. I could not wait any longer; I had to see my ladies once

again. Just as I was about to open the glorious book, my father knocked on the door.

“Jacob! Jacob! Come out of there! I know what you’re doing in there!”

He kept calling for me to come out, but I would not. I was desperate for a taste of the outside world. I had experienced life outside the borders of this quiet town stuck in the past. I would not stand for it a moment longer. I opened the booklet and began turning the pages as nude woman after nude woman passed by; their images forever ingrained in my mind. How beautiful they were; so natural and seemingly happy. I wanted to be happy also.

I’d have to face my father sooner or later, so I set the book down on my nightstand and marched to the door, ready for whatever consequence would come. I unlocked the door and stood tall, though I had my eyes closed tight. Nothing. I opened my eyes and saw my entire

family staring at me, as if I were a being from another world. In a way, I had become one.

My father placed his meaty hands on my shoulders and grasped them hard. I waited quietly for my imminent punishment.

“Jacob, I know what you’ve done. Don’t you know that I saw the bulge in your slacks? What about the way you ran into your room? It was as if you were running from the devil himself.”

He had seen the bulge. Why didn’t he punish me before we got back to the house? I would soon find out.

“Jacob, you’re still young, but the crime of lust must be punished no matter what age the sinner may be. According to our customs, we must isolate you from ourselves until God deems you clean enough to return to normal life.”

That was my chance. The only way I could convince my father to let me go out into the real world; into reality.

“Father,” I said. “let me venture out into the world where I may repent of my sinful ways.”

“My God, Jacob!” He screamed. “You’ve just lied on top of your crime of lust. You don’t want to go out into the world to repent. You want to go out to sin more. You’re tempted by the flashy lifestyle and brilliant colors of their society. Jacob, we escaped that place so that we could get away from that kind of life. I can’t allow you to leave this town.”

My father knew my true intentions. I had lied. I didn’t want to go out to repent; no, I wanted to go out to experience more of the outside world. Maybe, I could leave this place forever. Unfortunately, my father was a man of his word. He would not let me escape, and he would go to any length to ensure that.

With one quick motion, my father grabbed my arms and held them around my back so I could not move. My two younger brothers quickly moved and grabbed my legs and lifted me into a

horizontal position. I knew that it was no use to struggle. They carried me out of the house.

My grandfather was a very talented wood worker; one of his most favorite hobbies was the crafting of sepulchers for the deceased of the town. My father and my brothers carried me out to my grandfather's workshop. There, my grandfather uncovered one of the coffins and used one of his hand-cranked drills to make a hole in the lid.

I was placed gently inside the coffin and the lid was placed over me. Complete darkness was my only friend in the warm box. The only light was coming from the freshly drilled hole, which created a bright yellow circle on my leg. I heard someone driving nails into the lid of the coffin; the loud banging nearly making me deaf. Then I felt the coffin being lifted and carried out into the wilderness. I knew we were far away from the house when I heard the chirping of birds and the crushing of the dried leaves of autumn. The box was set down onto the ground and the only sounds

from then on were the distant sounds of my family's voices.

Now I lay here, being fed once a day by a mysterious hand that enters the hole that my grandfather drilled, and leaves a plate of bread and a small jar of water from the well. I no longer hear the voices of my family. God has yet to deem me clean; in fact, I doubt he ever will. The darkness and the circle of bright light are my only friends in this sepulcher of loneliness.

I now know, more than ever, that my place is not here in this world of non-sinners and Bible fanatics, but in the world of everyday sinners and the nude women only trying to make a dollar with which to live. If I have to die in this box, I will die knowing that there is a world outside where sin runs rampant, but that sin provides activity and meaning in a life where so much is uncertain. I love that world, and that is where I belong.

Untitled

By Julia A. Kelly

I really feel alone,

So alone in this world

I feel like I'm in a dark hole

And no one's around to help me out

No one knows I'm here

And it's all my fault for being so different from
everyone

Never letting anyone know how I feel

Then I see the light and go towards it

Looking through the light, I see a happy little girl
playing and dancing with her parents

She looks familiar to me like I had known her once
before

I look closer and see that the little girl is me

She is the part of me that was happy so many years
ago, when I was young with no hate or fear in my
heart.

She is the light in my life

The years and moments of happiness I had shared
with family and friends

But then the little girl disappears and a monster
takes her place

The light has become a fierce storm

The monster that lurks out there is also me

It is the hate and fear I feel in my heart and soul

This horrible monster is what I've become

I see now that I have to change and lose the hate
that I feel

I have to let my anger out of my soul
Or this creature will soon consume my entire life,
my being

I hear a voice calling me and again I see a light

But this light is different

This light belongs to God

He guides me out of the dark and into the light

I see my family waiting for me

And again I will feel loved and full of hope for
myself and for the world.

Untitled II

By Julia A. Kelly

Sometimes I feel like crying,
Sometimes I feel like dying,
The world's not worth all this agony
I can't handle it
I'm out of dreams
All I can see is a dark world
A world full of hate and pain

I wish someone would shoot me please
I just can't stand to be
To be here in a world full of blood
The blood of men who have died
Died, and why? For nothing
This world I will never miss
And now here I sit with a pistol in my hand
I pull the trigger and set myself free
I hope to find a better and more peaceful land.

Darkness & Light

By Julia A. Kelly

I am alone

All I can see is darkness

Darkness all around me

But then I see a light ahead of me

I hear a voice calling out to me

Calling me to come into the light

But I stay

Here in the darkness where I feel safe
Safe from everyone who has hurt me
I have been here so long, I am scared to leave
Scared to venture out to an unknown place
A place I have never been
A world I have never really seen
Perhaps someday I shall follow that light
And find myself again
But for now I will stay hidden and safe in the
darkness
The darkness shall protect me
Until I venture into the light so bright and
welcoming
But until then I shall stay here
Here in the faithful arms of darkness.

About The Authors

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